

Liberty, She Pirouette by oxfordlunch

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Summary:

*Sometimes, when Eddie lays in bed at night, he can hear his own heart beating, loud, louder than it's supposed to be, like a drum pounding right inside his ears, **throb--throb--throb**, and it keeps him awake, leaves him lying there bloodshot and unnerved. He used to think he was dying when it happened, like really dying, having a heart attack or something.*

*Now he just wonders if it's his body trying to remind him, **Hey, kid. You're alive. Remember?***

Or, Eddie Kaspbrak finds his way home.

1. 1989

Author's Note:

Title is borrowed from [Solsbury Hill](#) by Peter Gabriel.

It's six twenty-three PM and Eddie Kaspbrak has seven minutes to live. Unfortunately, none of his friends seem remotely concerned about this fact, and Eddie is rapidly starting to lose his fucking cool. Like, meltdown imminent, clutching his inhaler like it's a pistol with the safety disengaged.

"Remove your panties from your butcrack, Edsy!" Richie says, his volume set to DISTURB THE ENTIRE NEIGHBORHOOD, as usual. Stanley throws a twig at him and it bounces off his glasses. "Ow, Stan, what the fuck. Have you been playing sports? I will never forgive you if you've been playing sports. You bring dishonor to this fami-ry!"

"Beep beep, Richie," Mike cuts in. "The China man stuff, dude? Really?"

"I don't wear fucking panties, asshole!" Eddie shouts over the rest of the noise. "I. Have. To. Go. Home. Right. Fucking. Now. It's almost six thirty and my mom? My mom is gonna kill me. Dead. I'll be dead, dead like--" Georgie, he almost says, his mouth motoring on without him. "Dead like all of Richie's fucking brain cells, dead!"

"May they rest in peace," Stanley says. Bill giggles behind his fist next to him.

Eddie sucks in breaths and fumbles with the Indiglo button on his Timex, the daylight long gone at this time of day this late in October. Even the little blinky dots between the 6 and the 24 digits are stressing him the fuck out.

"It is Friday night, Eddie," Ben says, amiable as ever and trailing behind the group with his headphones cocked so that he's listening to his Walkman with one ear and the rest of them with the other. "And there's no curfew, now," he adds, and a few of the others nod. There

hasn't been a curfew since Henry Bowers was finally arrested for all those murders.

"See, Benihana gets it!" says Richie, flailing his hands in the air like he's just. So. Exasperated.

Here's the thing, though: Ben doesn't get it. Stanley doesn't get it, Mike probably doesn't get it, Bill definitely doesn't get it because his parents don't give a shit where he is, anymore, and Richie one-hundred-percent absolutely does not fucking get it. Richie doesn't get anything. Richie Tozier can't see anything that's not directly in front of his stupid face, spelled out in big flashy letters like the marquis on the Capitol.

"Eddie-bear, don't worry. I'll smooth things over with Sonia when I come over tonight to make some sweet, sweet lo--"

"Fuck you, Richie!" Eddie explodes. Any second now, he's gonna start saying stuff he doesn't mean to say. The words are just gonna come out like lava out of a volcano, *like jizz*, the Richie in his head says gleefully, no fucking stopping it, stains on everything, woah, jeez, Eds, chill man

"I'll walk you home, Eddie," Bev says all of a sudden, and they all shut up. Even Richie.

For a few seconds, anyway.

"Hey, Eds, I'll walk with you. I know you don't like the dark, buddy, I was just fucking around."

"God, shut up, Richard," Stan grumbles as they all turn around and start making for Eddie's house.

Beverly puts a hand on Eddie's shoulder, squeezing him gently and giving him a little shake.

Beverly, Eddie realizes all at once, feeling a little blindsided by the sudden whack of understanding upside his head, gets it. Of course she does.

He doesn't want to go home; he just has to.

He really just has to.

The Kaspbrak kitchen table hasn't been usable for its intended purpose since 1983, layers of household crap covering its surface like the cross-cut model in Eddie's science classroom at school that demonstrated the different layers of sediment. Junk mail, hospital bills, empty TV dinner cartons, little white paper bags from Keene's pharmacy with the staples still sticking out of them.

They eat dinner off TV trays every night.

Eddie dutifully collects two of them from the stand next to the couch, pasting a pleasant, naive look on his face even as he's cussing up a storm in his head from pinching his fingers trying to set the damn things up. Look what a good son I am, Ma, the expression says. Look how normal everything is even though we missed the first five minutes of Wheel and you didn't get to hear Pat introduce the contestants.

"Look at this hussy," his mother says, dropping herself down in her armchair with a put-upon huff, clicking the volume up with the remote.

Eddie looks. It's some bland lady with big hair and bigger shoulder pads in her blazer. Her name is Judy. She buys an 'A.'

"Yeah," he says agreeably.

Judy smiles at Pat Sajak, laughing at a quip he made.

"Oh, just mount him already," his mother says under her breath.

Eddie's not really sure what she means by that, but it's the kind of thing he's sure Richie would be only too delighted to describe to him. Eddie's pretty sure that most of the time, Richie doesn't know what the fuck he's talking about either, but it's kinda fun hearing about

stuff like that, even if it makes him red in the face. It feels like what he imagines smoking illicit cigarettes feels like. Just a little bit bad.

Yeah, he's real wild.

Maybe he'll even eat the brownie out of his dinner tray before the chicken.

He pokes at the corn in the corn compartment with his spoon until his mother snaps at him to eat, reminding him not-very-subtly that she's still angry with him-- he dutifully starts to shovel the shrively kernels into his mouth, chewing carefully to avoid her favorite lecture on choking, because he already knows it by heart.

Richie choked on a tater tot once, a hot one. Eddie had known exactly what to do.

A burst of tinny applause from the old TV set bleeds into the clatter of the wheel going around, and he remembers Georgie's tiny hands clapping, Stan bloodless and still standing by the phone ready to dial 911, Bill on the stuttering tail-end of a freak out, and Richie hugging Eddie fiercely, drooling and hoarse, *Dude, you saved me, holy shit*, the offending lump of potato sitting on Bill's kitchen floor like a starchy loogie.

He had nightmares, after, for weeks, where he didn't know what to do and Richie turned purple and died, hands grabbing wildly at nothing until his breath left him completely. It still makes him sick to think about. Lightheaded. What if, what if...?

When he gets down to it, he's not actually sure he minds his mother's lectures.

"It's Big Top Circus, dummy! Eddie-bear, watch. This idiot is going to blow it."

The contestant is a nervy little man with a few flyaway strands of red hair and tiny round glasses. He looks like he's about to hurl right on Pat Sajak's tie. "Can I... solve?"

"I don't know, Davey, can you?" Pat jokes, but gestures for him to go ahead.

Davey gets it right, and Eddie almost wants to applaud for him along with the crowd. Good for you, Davey. Have a fucking blast in Hawaii. Wear sunscreen.

His mother shakes her head, shifting around in her chair with some difficulty.

“The prizes are a lie, you know,” she announces as the commercial break rolls.

“What?” Eddie asks stupidly, caught off guard. “Why’s that, mommy?”

“Taxes, Eddie. You still have to pay taxes on all of it, every cent.”

“Oh,” he says, like he understands.

“There’s no free lunch in life, Eddie-bear. All these people, they always want to believe something big is going to happen to them. It’s ungrateful, is what it is. Ungrateful for what the good Lord has given them. Never happy, always looking for the next big thing.” She’s on a tear, now, and he doesn’t dare interrupt and ask for clarification. “But you remember, Eddie-- no free lunch. That little queer isn’t jetting off anywhere except the poor house.”

She heaves herself up out of her chair and stomps off to the kitchen to throw away her empty dinner tray, ranting as she goes. “People would do well to accept who they are, and be happy with it. The Lord gives them good health and a comfortable life, and they throw it back in His face, chasing after fairy tales. Ungrateful bunch of sinners.”

“Ok, mommy,” Eddie says quietly, shrinking into his chair.

Jeopardy! starts.

That Saturday, Eddie's kept inside, and he spends most of the day curled up on his bed, reading. When he gets bored of reading, he re-orders his comic collection by issue number. When he gets bored of that, he sits on the floor with his arms around his knees and his chin on top of his knees and pretends to be organizing his comic book collection when what he's really doing is looking off into space and thinking about life until his mouth feels sore from resting it against his bony kneecaps.

He daydreams, sometimes, about telling his mother how crappy it makes him feel to be sitting around all day. How it makes him feel buzzy and restless and makes his joints feel achey and his muscles feel weak and tired. How he grinds his teeth without realizing it until it gives him a headache. How his thoughts feel like movie reels with the last scenes all torn out so he never gets to see how any of the films end before a new one starts to roll.

She's making him sick, he thinks, not for the first time.

He wonders if she knows she's doing it. He wonders if her heart is in the right place, really, or if she's hurting him on purpose, and he wonders if that distinction even matters when the end result is the same.

Sometimes, when Eddie lays in bed at night, he can hear his own heart beating, loud, louder than it's supposed to be, like a drum pounding right inside his ears, *throb--throb--throb*, and it keeps him awake, leaves him lying there bloodshot and unnerved. He used to think he was dying when it happened, like really dying, having a heart attack or something.

Now he just wonders if it's his body trying to remind him, *Hey, kid. You're alive. Remember?*

He thinks he hears someone knock on the front door downstairs, and he perks his head up from *Uncanny X-men #249* and strains his ears, but all he hears is the door slamming, shaking the whole house, and his mother's slippers clicking on the hall floor as she goes back to the TV.

If he went to his bedroom window to look, he's pretty sure he'd see

Richie Tozier slumping away down the sidewalk, open shirt fluttering around his skinny arms because he's a dumbass and he's always dressed completely inappropriately for the cold.

It's kinder not to torture himself, though, so he doesn't look.

On Sunday, he puts on his blue oxford shirt and his red bow tie and they go to church.

The service feels like it lasts three hours, like usual, but Eddie manages not to fall asleep between the readings and the fiery preaching and the general insistence that he could be doing better in God's eyes. He's rewarded for his wakefulness with a slap on the hand when he eyes the doughnuts and apple juice in the parish hall afterwards.

"We don't know who's touched those, Eddie," his mother hisses, and that's the end of it.

It's a beautiful fall day, sunny and crisp, and when they head home, he considers pushing his luck a little and asking to go outside, even though he knows he's not exactly back in good graces yet.

He gets even luckier than he imagined; his mother immediately falls asleep in front of the television, looking like she might be down for a while. Do all adults get sleepy like that, he wonders sometimes, or is she sick too?

While the thought concerns him a little, it's not enough to stop him immediately putting his jacket back on and ducking silently out the front door, careful not to let it slam. He jumps the front steps and jogs the first few yards down the sidewalk before he settles into a comfortable walk. Crisp air, clean and fresh, fills his lungs, and he thinks he may never need his inhaler again, he feels so healthy and alive.

Dead leaves crunch under his church shoes. He imagines he's Rogue from the X-men and he's sapping the life out of them, taking all that healthy leaf goodness into his own body.

The walk isn't very long. He reaches Neibolt street in a few minutes, passes the empty lot on the corner with a shiver and an extra, nervous spring in his step. The lot gives him the creeps. He feels little rat feet scuttle up his spine, that sure and certain feeling like he's being followed, the same one he gets when he darts up the basement stairs in the dark. He's suddenly sure there's something... shambling... behind him, but when he finally steels himself and looks--

An empty street. A rusty old Coke can in the gutter. Dead little honey locust leaves blowing around like confetti.

He remembers breaking his arm that past summer, and realizes all of a sudden that he's pretty sure they were playing here when it happened. How he managed to break it in an empty lot remains a mystery, and he shrugs off the thought and walks on, still feeling half-sure there's something right on his tail.

Eventually, he reaches the end of Neibolt, where it starts to turn into the train yard, but he doesn't feel much like sitting around and watching the trains today. His Sunday destination lies further on, within the cluster of houses and shady yards his mother never, ever drives them through.

The church is painted a bright yellow, like the sun in the corner of a little kid's crayon drawing, the paint peeling up in places. The yard is well-kept and full of flowers, however, and the whole place sings to Eddie of good things.

The singing rises up through the rafters, out the little vented windows near the roof, filling up his skinny chest with what he would swear on any bible is the spirit of God. He imagines the devils that followed him down Neibolt street are running scared of this place, shrieking and fleeing, burning up in the sunlight glow.

He picks his way through a patch of grass at the very edge of the church yard, careful not to step on anything blooming, and settles

down with his back to a big old tree, hugging his knees and closing his eyes, tapping his fingers gently against his thigh in time with the heartbeat-steady handclaps shaking the church's walls.

He could never ask Richie along for this, he thinks. Richie, who likes to make jokes about how Jesus is a dirty hippie to make Stanley smile, wouldn't understand that while Eddie doesn't know if Jesus is necessarily what's out there, he knows there's something big, somewhere. Something big and beautiful. There has to be, he reasons, for there to be music like this. Light shining right through the darkness.

He thinks Mike might understand what he means.

It had taken some time for Eddie and Mike to become anything closer than friends-once-removed, because frankly, Eddie hadn't really known what to make of someone so dreamy and quiet and utterly solemn; a lot of the time, it was easy to forget Mike was even the same age as all of them. Being around Mike, Eddie quickly realized, tended to make him feel like a stupid kid, like he was loud and obnoxious and childish. And maybe he was all of those things, but it was uncomfortable to have to actually acknowledge that.

The first time Eddie spent any time alone with Mike, it was practically an accident. The invitation had really been extended to Bill, but Eddie had been laying there in the hammock working his way through a packet of Big League Chew and a new X-Men book and had been invited out of politeness. Or at least he had to assume that was why. In any case, it sounded like a nice way to disappear for a Saturday, so he had placated his mother with a long, agreeable conversation about his allergy medication over breakfast, told her he was off to Bill's house for the afternoon, and bolted for his bike as soon as he was out of her sight, pedaling hard and fast until he was sure he was far enough away that she couldn't somehow call him back in.

It had turned out Bill had come down with a stomach bug, though, and Eddie wished him well from about ten feet away and got back on his bike, his own stomach feeling sort of sick at the prospect of having to go home already. “Hey Bill, where’s Mike’s house at anyway?” he’d asked, feeling desperate.

A long-ass bike ride away, was the answer to that question, but Eddie had made it eventually, his tires kicking up dust on Mike’s dirt driveway and his heart hammering with unsurety. He’d been deciding whether or not he should knock on the farmhouse door when frantic barking from behind him had startled him so badly he screamed and dropped his bike.

The dog, a bright-eyed scruffy thing that looked like it probably knew how to herd sheep, had been tailed by Mike, equally bright-eyed and wearing a barn coat and rubber boots.

“He’s friendly, don’t worry,” Mike had assured him, smiling, as the dog snuffled at Eddie’s feet. “Hi, Eddie!”

“Bill’s sick,” Eddie had blurted. “He couldn’t come. He’s like, throwing up and stuff, he probably caught a stomach flu or something, I’m always telling those guys not to eat the cafeteria food and this is exactly why. I wouldn’t be caught dead eating that pizza. He probably has botulism.”

Mike had looked a little lost. “You still came by yourself?”

“Well, yeah, I mean. We’re friends, right?” Eddie hadn’t actually been sure about the answer to that question, but he’d wanted it to be true. And sometimes, if you say something out loud, it makes it a little more real.

Mike had lit up like fireworks on the fourth of July. Eddie had been able to see it in his eyes.

An hour later, Eddie had found himself with Mike’s old outgrown boots on his feet and a big rusty horse chewing his sweatshirt sleeve. He’d been torn between disgust and delight. He’d wondered why the ankle-deep manure and dirty straw weren’t bothering him more.

"How are you not sick all the time? All the, you know. Shit. And dirt. And mold, mold can actually kill you if you breathe it--"

"Our hay's not moldy," Mike had said, sounding deeply offended at the idea. "And I don't really get sick, I don't know... I don't think my grandpa does either."

"Huh. Weird. Hey, can I ride the horse?"

Mike had obligingly shoved him up on the horse's bare back with a stern, "Only if you can be calm."

"Holy shit, this is high up."

"Sit up straight and put your heels down. Heels, Eddie." Eddie had flopped his feet uselessly, and Mike had chuckled and grabbed one, yanking his heel down to show him. "Heels, dummy. There you go."

"My mom is gonna kill me."

There was a trick with big animals, Mike had explained, after he had lead Eddie around in circles for a while, helped him down, and taken him to see a bunch of sheep who were milling around in an open-sided barn. "They feel your energy, so you can't be nervous, or it'll spook them."

"So if you're calm, they'll be calm?"

"Mostly, yeah. It sort of works on people, too. You just... bring your energy down low, even if they're really upset. My grandpa says that's how you can avoid escalating bad situations."

"Really?"

"Ayuh."

Eddie had thought about that for a minute. "Would it work on Richie?"

Mike had busted out in a wonderful, full-bodied laugh at that. "No. No, I don't think it would."

They had gone in for dinner around three in the afternoon, which Eddie thought was a little strange, but he'd washed his hands, washed them again, took off his dirty sweatshirt for good measure, and slid into a seat at the unfinished kitchen table next to Mike.

The first thing they'd done is say grace, Eddie joining hands with Mike and his grandfather in a tiny circle. That had given him some weird day-ja-voo, alright. Dinner had been lamb, which Eddie had never had before that he could remember. He'd poked at it with his fork, not wanting to be rude but unable to wrap his head around the pinks and greys of it.

"We grew that lamb here," Mike had said finally, kindly, already finished with his own. "It's really healthy. We take really good care of them and you can't get sick from eating it."

So Eddie had eaten it. He hadn't wanted to offend Mike's grandpa, and he was also pretty damn hungry, and honestly? It was nice to eat something that hadn't been microwaved. Even if it tasted a little bit like hay. He'd also been served a generous portion of some boiled new red potatoes loaded with butter and salt and some buttered bread, and he ate all that too.

Mike's grandpa, Leroy, was a nice man. Pretty serious and a little scary, but Eddie thought he was nice overall. Dinner had been full of chatter about the farm, things that had been done that day and things that still needed doing and things that may need doing in the distant future, animals that weren't looking too well and animals that were thriving. The kitchen had been warm and had smelled like their dinner and woodsmoke and the same farmy smell that clung to everything on Mike's property, and Eddie had felt relaxed and full, a little sleepy. Things he'd never felt at home before.

After dinner, Mike's grandpa had suggested they listen to some records, and he had let Mike boil some milk from an unlabeled glass jug in the fridge and get out the Swiss Miss. Eddie had gotten the impression this was something of a treat for Mike, who kept looking at Eddie like he couldn't quite believe he was here in his house.

There had been a box of records nestled next to an old turntable in the living room, and Eddie had flipped through them curiously, not

recognizing any of them. There were a lot of covers featuring men with saxophones or trumpets, with names he couldn't pronounce.

"Hey, he looks cool. Mike, is this one cool?"

"Son, you don't know Sam Cooke?" Leroy had said, peering over Eddie's shoulder at the album he'd pulled out and shaking his head. "That's just plain sad. Put that on, and be careful with it."

So Eddie had sat there on a scratchy rug that people had probably walked all over with dirty shoes, sipping hot chocolate and having his inexperienced musical mind completely blown. The rolling beat, the little jogs of trumpet and saxophone, and the best singing voice he'd ever heard... He'd been moved, and a little angry.

A lot angry. To hear his mother talk about some people... It wasn't fair.

He had looked at Mike, and felt consumed by how unfair it was.

Come on and let the good times roll

We're gonna stay here till we soothe our souls

If it take all night long

"I'm glad we're friends, Mike," Eddie had said, loudly, right over the music. It was probably an awkward, stupid thing to say, but he said it anyway, and he wasn't sorry about it.

God, his mother would be so furious if she caught him here. He imagines going home and her interrogating him about where he's been-- Down at the gospel church, Ma, how do you like that?-- and revels in the tiny, rebellious kick the thought gives him.

A voice, husky and smiling, cuts into his thoughts.

“Well, hello there, Stringbean.”

Eddie’s eyes snap wide open and he looks up, startled. “Um--”

“Whatchu doin’ this side of town, all in your Sunday best?”

The black man in front of him is tall and bald and wiry, with a greying beard and a green wool blazer. His smile is crooked, and there aren’t many teeth left in it. Ray-Ban sunglasses obscure his eyes entirely.

Eddie feels very much like he’s been caught doing something he wasn’t supposed to be doing.

“Um,” he says again, slowly getting to his feet and brushing off his pants.

The man takes a step closer and lowers himself stiffly down to one knee in front of Eddie, making them almost the same height. “You like the music, son? Is that it? That’s all right.”

“I’m sorry,” Eddie tries.

He’s not afraid of the man, necessarily. Something about his missing teeth makes Eddie’s spine crawl, but that doesn’t seem fair.

“It’s *good* music, isn’t it.”

Eddie nods, swallows. “I like it,” he croaks.

The man beams. “Then you got good taste.” He reaches into his coat pocket. “You ever held a real silver dollar, young man? That’s way before your time, silver dollars.”

A quarter, a quarter, I’ll blow you for a quarter, boy, just a quarter--

“Nothankyou,” Eddie says all in a tumble. “I should go, my mom--”

“Woah now, take it easy.” The man pulls out a gleaming coin from his pocket. “Ain’t nothing bad gonna happen to you here, son. This a good place, you already know that.” He reaches out his hand, the coin laying flat in his palm for Eddie to take.

Eddie swallows again. He feels like he should be grappling for his inhaler, or maybe running away screaming. If he was ever asked, he wouldn't for the life of him be able to explain why the next thing he does is reach out his own hand and gingerly take the coin from the man's wrinkled palm.

The metal is warm to the touch. "That's a lucky coin, right there," the man says.

"Thank you," Eddie says, his voice small.

The singing in the church seems to grow louder, and louder still, and the man beams at him again with that toothless old smile, reaching up to take the arm of his sunglasses between his fingers. He slides them off and holds them to the side, and Eddie gapes.

The man's eyes contain galaxies, swirling blue and black and purple like bruises, stars like needle pricks, rushing and dancing and going on and on and

Gone, within seconds.

Eddie blinks his eyes against the sun now dappling through the branches of the tree that's supporting his back, opening them slowly like he's coming up out of a hot and restless sleep. The music seems to have finished for the day, and he shoots up to his feet and decides to get out of dodge before anyone finds him hanging around. Or, god-forbid, his mother wakes up and comes and finds him here.

He doesn't find the silver dollar in his jacket pocket until weeks later, when he's cleaning out the pockets before throwing the jacket in the washing machine, on account of it being splashed with Richie's sick because the moron decided to try a nice big swig from his dad's bottle of scotch and couldn't keep it down.

It's the weirdest thing, though, because it looks like a real coin, but Eddie's pretty damn sure they never made silver dollars with a fucking turtle on the tails side.

2. Somewhere In Between, Pt. 1

There's a startling sense of peace, when it's over. The most peace he's had in what feels like a lifetime.

He lays there in the cool grass and wonders if this is what a vacation feels like.

"Ugh, Eddie, no. That's so sad."

Eddie blinks, not really sure he even heard anyone say anything at all. The grass is really soft and the world smells like clean laundry, the nothing smell of hypoallergenic soap and cotton. The skin on his hands doesn't itch. His mouth isn't so dry. He can feel all of his fingers and toes.

His ring finger is bare, and he's no longer see-through; even his t-shirt looks brand-new.

There's music, crackling like vinyl, so close it might only be in his own head. *Bring it to me*

"Bring your sweet lovin'," he murmurs along with it. "Bring it on home..."

The maybe-there voice sounds even more annoyed this time. "You know you're dead, right?"

"I'm aware, Stanley," because *that's* who that is. Of course it is. He'd know that voice anywhere, nevermind the octave change it's had since he last heard it.

"This is the moment you're deciding, Eddie, out of all the moments in your entire spazzy life, to be calm about something?"

Eddie shrugs, rolling his head to one side, letting the grass tickle his uninjured cheek. "Weren't you?"

Stanley laughs, sounding hollow. "No. No, I really was not."

"I did the right thing for once in my life, Stanley. I can fuckin' live

with that.”

“No, you can’t, actually, because you’re fucking dead, Spaghetti.”

Eddie wrinkles his nose. “Since when do you call me that?”

“You ever get that Go-Kart engine running, sport?”

Eddie spooks. “Hey, who the fuck--” He rolls over and staggers to his feet, looking from left to right frantically like he’s about to jaywalk a busy street. “Is this the fucking clown again? Swear to God... Is being dead not enough for you, fucker? Huh? You comin’ for my eternal soul, too? Well guess what, fucker! I’m not afraid of you anymore! Let’s fucking go--”

IT IS NO MORE.

“What the fuck...” Eddie says faintly, looking around again at the unbroken blue sky, the lush grass that goes on for what must be miles, the landscape flat as a pancake.

A MOST JOYOUS OCCASION.

A *pop* to Eddie’s left nearly sends him out of his skin. When he looks, he sees an absurd, lonely little firework shell fluttering to the ground in a sprinkling of colorful confetti.

“Stanley?” Eddie says, spinning around and looking for him. “Stanley!? What the fuck is this? Seriously, Stan, this is not fucking funny, where the fuck are you? Listen, whoever this is, if you’re not really Stanley, I’m gonna fucking kill you, you hear me? Hear that?”

“And there’s the Eddie Kaspbrak I know and love,” Stanley’s voice says from nowhere in particular.

IT IS GOOD TO SEE YOU AGAIN, EDDIE KASPBRAK.

“Okay, seriously, what the fuck is that voice, bro?” Eddie hisses. “*Stanley--*”

“That’s Maturin.”

Eddie doesn't even know what to say to that.

"He's the cosmic turtle," Stan clarifies helpfully.

The turtle is dead, Eddie remembers. Bill said it. *The turtle can't save us*. Eddie definitely remembers because he had no fucking clue what the hell he was talking about, it had sounded like fucking gibberish, and now--

RUMORS OF MY DEATH ARE UNTRUE. DISREGARD THEM.

I MANAGED TO DISLODGE THE GALAXY FROM MY THROAT.

I FEEL FINE NOW.

And it takes a minute, but as that mental image sinks in, Eddie starts to giggle uncontrollably, flopping his ass down on the ground and struggling to get his breath back, the relentlessly cheerful afterlife sun washing over him and buoying his mood even further.

"Is this about the tater tot?" Stan asks cautiously.

"Y-e-s-ss," Eddie manages, shoulders shaking with laughter.

IT WAS MUCH LIKE THE TATER TOT.

"Stan, help, I'm gonna piss myself."

"That sounds like a 'you' problem, Eddie."

"Someone fuckin' tell Richie the turtle is funnier than him."

"Tell him yourself."

"Fuck," Eddie says, swiping water away from his eyes as he tries to get himself together. "I missed you so much, man. I missed all of you so fucking much..." He feels like he hasn't laughed like this in forever, not before sitting down to dinner that night at the Chinese place. Before Richie fucking Tozier smashed a decorative gong and hit the reset button on Eddie's miserable little existence. It would be a stretch to call what he's been doing all these years 'living.' 'Existing' might even be too generous.

“I missed you too, Eddie.”

“I turned into such a garbage human being without you guys,” he says in a rush. “I was a horrible fucking person, Stanley, you woulda been so fucking disappointed in me...”

“Hey, don’t tell me how I would feel.”

“Wow,” Eddie says, feeling like he might cry for less-funny reasons now, “And now I’m dead. I’m just... over. Oh, fuck.”

NOT OVER.

“Fuck, oh fuck. Did Richie make it?” Eddie asks urgently. He’s been assuming, he realizes all at once, and he has to know, he *has to know*--

It has to have been worth it; he has to know it was worth it, or resting in peace is going to be just another daydream for him, just another thing he sits at his desk and fantasizes about, like all the stock car races he never went to see and all the gluten-yes-dairy-yes pizza he never let himself eat. He’s never getting a second chance at any of that shit, so he has to know--

“You saved Richie, Eddie,” Stan says firmly. “He’s alive.”

“Oh, thank God...”

Eddie relaxes back down into the grass, scrunching his eyes shut and breathing deep. Nobody, human or turtle, speaks for a long, long time.

“Hey, Maturin?” he says finally, hesitant, unable to help feeling a little ridiculous addressing the big voice in the sky. “What did you mean, not over?”

EDDIE KASPBRAK IS NOT OVER.

THIS WAS DETERMINED MANY YEARS AGO.

He shakes his head, a little pit of dread starting to widen inside the deepest part of his stomach.

YOU ARE THE ONE IT FEARED, EDDIE. YOU ARE SPECIAL.

Eddie shakes his head over and over again, cupping his hands over his face. “No. No, not me. That’s not me. That’s so... No. No. Please don’t be saying what I think you’re saying. No, absolutely not--”

YES.

“No, fuck off! I want to be over, man. Let me be over. I’m supposed to be fuckin’ over, I can’t... I don’t want it.” Send Stanley back. Send Stan back, he thinks, they need him.

STANLEY IS A DIFFERENT CONCERN.

“Fuck off, fuck *off*. I don’t want it--”

IT IS NOT YOUR TIME TO BE OVER.

“I don’t want to go back!” Eddie all but screams it into his hands, rolling onto his side in the grass and curling up, his breathing ragged. “Just put me out of my fucking misery, man, please. *Please*. I saved Richie, I saved him, I sacked up and I saved him, why the fuck isn’t that *enough*?”

YOUR LIFE FOR IT’S LIGHT. THIS IS HOW IT MUST BE.

“I can’t! I fuckin’ can’t, man, I can’t...” His eyes are wet, and no amount of blinking is helping. “I can’t do it, I can’t be fucking trusted with it, I ruined it, I’m a pathetic, scared, miserable *waste*, man, don’t you get it? I don’t know how to not be that way, I don’t know how to fix it, there’s something fucking *wrong with me*--”

I WILL SHOW YOU.

That sounds ominous, he realizes, somewhere inside his haze of “no” and tears. He sniffs hard and uncovers his face, looking around frantically at the unbroken blue sky.

“Hey, hey, uh-uh. Do not! Do not pull some Christmas Carol, Charles Dickens crap with me, Maturin, do *not*--”

MAKE GOOD CHOICES.

And the next time Eddie blinks, it's all gone up in a puff of theatrical smoke, his ears ringing with the sound of bells and gospel choirs and the clatter-clack of a wheel being given a good, hard spin.

There's no weird vertigo, no Dorothy Gale swirl of Technicolor and noise; he just opens his eyes again, and there he is.

Standing in the middle of a Foodtown with his cell phone camera leveled at a box of rice cereal.

"What the fuck," he says, even as he snaps the photo and ships it off with a quick text message tacked on like a caption to MYRA KASPBRAK.

MYRA
GMO's, eddie

MYRA
do they have earth harvest

ME
no they have this one and they have rice krispies

MYRA
where are u??

ME
foodtown

Eddie thinks it's a pretty fucking funny name for a grocery store. He's always gotten a kick out of it. He kind of wishes he had someone to laugh about it with.

MYRA

eddie I asked you to go to whole foods

MYRA

its like u don't even hear me talk sometimes

Maybe he didn't feel like going to fucking Whole Foods after nine hours at the office, *Myra*, excuse the fuck out of him for not wanting to elbow rich hippies out of the way for an hour and suffer through the millennial cashier telling him all about how benevolent their corporate overlords are for sending her on a three-week-long work retreat in fucking Peru, which is what happened the *last* time he went there...

His phone starts buzzing again in his hand because MYRA KASPBRAK is calling him. He wonders, like he always does, if he could get away with pretending there's no good reception in the store, but he knows from past attempts at that that it just makes her frantic.

"Hi honey," he says.

"Eddie, this is *your* diet plan and you can't even be bothered to go to the right store?"

"Myra--"

"Do you even care? I don't even know why I try, sometimes. It's like you want to make yourself sick, you eat things you're not supposed to, you skip appointments, you drink *alcohol*..."

He wants to click the call volume down a few notches, but it won't go any lower.

"I'm not your mother, Eddie! I don't want to nag you like this, but you just make it so difficult sometimes, I could scream--"

"Myra, honey." You already are, he thinks. "I'm sorry, I'm just... I've had this headache today." He whines it. It's intentional.

Sit up, he thinks. Roll over. Beg. He's very well-trained.

"Oh, sweetheart, is it another migraine?"

"I don't know," he says pathetically. "It really hurts."

Play dead is his best trick.

There's another guy in the cereal aisle who looks like one of the guys always standing around the side of the thruway with an orange vest on, pretending to look busy. He gives Eddie a somewhat disgusted look.

Yeah, those got lopped off when I was a puppy, man, he thinks. No use looking for them now.

He blinks and he's standing in his familiar old living room, with the familiar cream-colored walls and the oversized leather furniture and the tacky Live, Laugh, Love above the mantel. Myra's the kind of person who should never be allowed to roam freely in a Christmas Tree Shops, and their house shows it.

"Edd-ieeee," Myra calls from upstairs.

It's like watching himself in a movie, disconcerting like listening to his own 'You've reached Edward Kaspbrak...' message on his voicemail, the distorted sound of his own speech.

He goes upstairs, slow, careful steps up the carpeted staircase, and detours left into the ensuite. It's impossible to avoid his own eyes in the medicine cabinet mirror.

Perfectly normal, Dr. Yi had told him at his yearly physical. *Perfectly normal for a man your age, nothing to be ashamed of...*

He yanks the cabinet open, instantly relieved to be rid of his own

reflection, and takes a bottle from the crowded shelf. He pops the cap with a well-practiced hand and throws a pill back dry.

Perfectly fucking normal.

He picks up another bottle.

His pharmacist did a bad job with the label on this one. EDWARD F KASPBRAK is half-covered by the crooked orange sticker that says CONTROLLED SUBSTANCE DANGEROUS UNLESS USED AS DIRECTED.

He swallows three of those.

He doesn't let the mirror catch him as the cabinet door swings shut again.

He blinks and he turns over, facing the back of the couch and tugging the blanket tighter around himself, wide awake and uncomfortable.

He thinks about trying out the floor in a desperate bid to save his back, which feels bent in places it's not supposed to bend.

He blinks and his sweater is too warm, Myra red-faced and clearly also uncomfortable by his elbow. Everyone in his office is milling around like ugly little ornaments, plastic tumblers in hand and fakey cheer on their faces. There's a vodka-cranberry sweating in his hand and he takes a long, hard sip of it.

"Guh," he says when he comes back up for air.

"It's too warm in here," Myra says, in her I'd Like to Speak to a Manager voice that Eddie absolutely cannot judge too hard because he's also got an advanced degree in terrorizing retail associates that he's not all that proud of.

"Yes, it is," he agrees, taking another long drink.

"That cranberry juice is full of corn syrup, Eddie." Take it easy, Eddie, he hears. And he knows it's not really the Ocean Spray that makes her anxious.

"This will probably be about it for me," he says honestly, only because he doesn't think he's going to be able to stand being in this room long enough to pretend-to-sip another one.

"Heyyy, Ed!" says Howard from Accounts, and Eddie immediately re-thinks his drinking plans.

He musters a fake smile. Howard proffers his hand, which is something Howard lives for, because then he gets to poke fun at Eddie's hand sanitizer addiction when Eddie reaches for the Purel pump bottle seconds after. Eddie shakes his hand, seething inside. Fucking asshole. "Merry Christmas, Howard."

"Merry Christmas, buddy! Oh, shoot, you want me to go see if I can find a baby wipe?" Eddie's smile slips a little. "I kid, I kid. I swear I'm not contagious. Hey, who's your friend?"

Eddie gratefully takes the opportunity to step back a little and he nudges Myra forward with a hand on her waist. "This is my wife, Myra."

"It's nice to meet you, Howard," she says, tone as fake as the artificial Christmas tree standing in the corner.

"No fuckin' way," Howard says, wide-eyed, looking between the both of them. "Sorry, Jesus, that was rude." He drains his plastic cup. "Fuck me, well. I clearly need another drink! Merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas," Myra says as Howard turns around and bolts for the bar.

“We’re going,” Eddie says flatly, shoving it all down, all the ugly everything that just started boiling up and over inside him like a pot of milk kept over high heat. “Too fucking warm in here, I can’t...” He slams back the end of his drink and throws the empty cup at a garbage can with so much force it bounces right back out again and rolls around on the floor.

“Well, that was strange,” Myra says like they just saw a pigeon do something weird and like Eddie isn’t furiously tugging her along by the hand.

Stop pretending, he rages in his head. Stop fucking pretending stop acting like you don’t know what he meant just stop you dumb--

He blinks and he’s standing in his bathroom again, shirtless.

Honestly, he’s in great shape. He’s cut, even. Looking at his chest in the mirror, he thinks you wouldn’t even guess he was fast approaching forty. Myra feeds him right, all protein and organic vegetables, and he works out at the office gym in the mornings and never tells her he does because she’s convinced he’s too asthmatic to run safely.

He’s clean, and well-groomed, and he had an absolutely sterling physical when he saw the doctor just last month, and he still feels *sick*.

He still feels sick.

The thing is, nobody’s ever stopped and asked him to explain it. Doctors listen to his grievances with a bored, sympathetic ear and write him prescriptions for whatever he wants. Myra feeds his neurosis like you’re supposed to feed a cold. His mother? His mother set fire to this house while he was still in it, left him sleeping in his bed while the drywall started to burn, and now the smoke is so goddamn thick he doesn’t think he’s ever going to feel his way back

out.

If someone ever did ask him, he'd say it was like when your body does something weird. Just a weird something, like a hard twinge in your gut, or too many days gone without shitting right, or a fever when there's nothing else bothering you. The sinking feeling, the wormy voice at the base of your brain that says, *ooh, it's cancer for sure this time, pal...*

Eddie feels like that every second of every hour of every day of his hamster-wheel little life.

Sometimes, what scares him more than anything is that he's not really sure he's even afraid of dying anymore.

He just wants off the wheel. He's tired.

The itch to medicate himself with anything he can get his hands on always hits him strong, like what he imagines a smoker feels like when they're dying for a cigarette. What do people always say? It's the ritual of it more than the smoking itself?

He tugs the cabinet open, pulls out the bottle of Delsym, and takes a long, syrupy drink.

He blinks and he's driving in the dark, not even sure he remembers where they're coming from but certain of the route home. The defogger is blowing, the only real noise filling up the space. He turns it down a notch and turns up the radio out of habit.

"You know I hate this crap, Eddie, please change it."

He obediently pokes the seek button and Tool is replaced by Michael Bolton.

"And can you please put both hands back on the wheel? You make

me nervous--”

“How many times do I have to tell you that statistically, overcorrecting is way more dangerous than driving one-handed--”

“I’m *really* not in the mood--”

--nevermind the *fucking* airbag blowing out your elbows, *fine*,” he finishes, clenching his jaw and replacing his hands at ten and two. He hears her huffing and seething over in her seat, sees her staring stone-faced at the windshield out of the corner of his eye.

Five minutes of adult contemporary and silence later, he apologizes for swearing.

He blinks and it’s summer and he’s in the middle of a parking lot next to his Escalade, sweltering. Everything is reflective, blinding sun bouncing off metallic paint and asphalt and shopping cart corrals. It feels like the Sahara fucking desert and he’s standing there in a suit jacket and tie, panting like he just finished a 5k.

It takes him a second to register the massive dent in his driver side door.

“Oh, what the *fuck*,” he says. “What the fuck, what the fuck-- Hey!”

Someone is clambering out of the red Silverado parked on his driver side. “Sir! Hey, sir, I’m so sorry-- it’s my husband’s truck and I don’t usually drive it and I am so, so sorry, the wind just took the door right out of my hand--”

“What wind?? There’s no fucking wind today! You’d need a fucking jet turbine to fly a kite out here; how fucking hard is it to hang on to a door??”

The lady shrinks back a little, but keeps walking around the back of

the truck to where Eddie's standing, dollar flip flops slapping the pavement. "I'll pay you for the damage. I'm so sorry. I was sitting here waiting for you to come back, I didn't want to just drive off."

"What, you want a gold medal for not leaving the scene of an accident?" Eddie barks. He can't actually stop, or at least it feels like he can't. He's fuming. He keeps looking at the dent, thinking about his day planner filling up; the garage, the insurance claim, the garage again, the way the door just isn't going to be the same again, ever, no matter what the hell he does. "Look at my fucking truck!"

His Caddy; his *baby*. Eddie doesn't keep photos of family on his desk at work, but if he did, there'd be a little stand frame with a picture of his car in the place of honor, Daddy's Little Premium Luxury SUV. He'd send that fucking truck to private school. That truck might as well have a trust fund.

"Hey, it wasn't an accident, buddy, relax. Nobody's hurt," the lady says, a placating hand bobbing in front of her. "I promise I'll pay you in full; let me give you my information."

Eddie stares at her, feeling wild-eyed. "Do you have any fucking idea how much this truck cost me? Of course you don't, you shop at fucking Old Navy!" he rants, shoving a hand into his hair because he feels like he's vibrating right out of his skin, rattling like whatever timing belt keeps his own motor running has snapped in two. "Fuck. FUCK." He kicks the nearest light post. "FUCK."

He's out of control. *Kick*. Out of control. Out of control, out of control...

He knows he should just stop, get ahold of himself, stop acting like a fucking psycho, just stop, Eddie, stop, take a fucking breath, but he doesn't know how. His brakes are worn out, and he wonders absently if that's not because he rides them all the fucking time, he throws the brakes and throws them and now there's nothing left of them. He just watches himself throw a tantrum until the lady locks herself back in her truck and calls the cops.

He blinks and he's shopping the inside of his medicine cabinet like it's a candy store. Two of them, three of those, and a pack of that, please, Mister. Gotta get home before Mom comes looking for me.

It's funny, actually, because he can't remember if he was ever even allowed in a candy store when he was a kid. He thinks the odds aren't very good.

He blinks and he's on Broadway, the January slush and rock salt trashing his shoes. Myra waddles by his side, both of them penguin-walking in an effort not to slip. The sky is glowing with the brilliant not-dark that he's only ever experienced in Manhattan.

"That was the worst show. That was it. There will never be a worse show than that nightmare."

Myra giggles, clutching his hand tightly. "I'm so sorry. Everyone always says it's supposed to be a classic."

"I'm gonna have bad dreams about all the hair."

"Oh, really? I was thinking of having Jenny do mine like that for my next hair appointment."

Eddie snorts and squeezes her hand back. This is the closest things have felt between them in years, and he wonders why it took a horrifying musical revival to get them both laughing again. They could be friends, he thinks. Sure, they're already married, but he's spent ten years wondering if Myra was even his friend. He thinks she could be. He really does. That would be nice, he thinks. He doesn't have any other friends anymore.

Maybe they can be nicer to each other. Maybe they can do that.

They turn a corner, crossing the street to avoid a section of construction on the facade of one of the buildings. The crowd is thinning out as they go, because the ramp Eddie parked in is significantly out of the way, the walk to get back to it convoluted and confusing. Myra would never find it again without him. He tells himself that's a normal thing to feel good about.

Myra's grip on his hand tightens again suddenly and she steps up her pace. It takes him a few seconds to realize why, but then he catches sight of the huddled mass of person and coat under one of the overhangs coming up on their right. It's a man, he sees as they walk closer, and Eddie can feel Myra practically pulling him towards the street by the hand, ordering him silently to cross.

There are a thousand universes, Eddie thinks, maybe a million, where he just lets her tug him across the street, like a little kid. Like a dog by the collar. Heel, boy.

It's the dumbest thing, but something about the guy's dark hair curling out from under his knit hat, his pale skin, his gigantic, outdated, what Myra would call pedophile glasses, has him jerking his hand away from hers and reaching for his wallet in the breast pocket of his coat.

"Eddie," she hisses, and oh boy, is she pissed already. He's gonna be huddled on the couch tonight wrapped in a blanket, too. "Eddie, we *talked about this--*"

"It's fine, Myra," he says, cracking his wallet open and counting.

The guy's sign says JESUS WOULD HAVE CARED.

How much are rooms going for, these days, he wonders. He decides on an even two hundred.

"Hey, man, are you sure?" the guys says, eyes going even wider behind his huge lenses. He looks extremely sick. Eddie keeps his distance as much as he can while still handing the guy the cash.

"Yeah, buddy, just fuckin' take it. Happy..." he thinks for a second.

“Martin Luther King Day, I guess, I don’t know.”

“Eddie!” Myra barks.

“God bless you, man. God bless you.” Whatever fever the guy’s got going on has his eyes sparkling, like you could see all the stars in them that should be hanging above all of their heads if it weren’t for the light pollution. His fucking glasses are still twiggling something in Eddie’s memory, like he can’t remember if he left the iron plugged in at home, a little scary to think about, and he knows it’s going to keep driving him nuts all night, why this homeless guy looks so familiar.

“Don’t spend it all at one dealer,” Eddie says.

The guy laughs, hoarse and hacking. “Here, man, I’ll trade you,” he says suddenly, fishing around in his coat pocket.

“Dude, it’s fine, seriously--”

“Catch,” the guy says and flips him a silver coin. Eddie catches it in one hand, turning it over and glancing at it in the dim light.

“What’s this, fuckin’ Chuck-E-Cheese money? What’s with the turtle?”

“Eddie, *enough*,” Myra snaps, grabbing him by the elbow and physically dragging him away, making him stumble.

“God bless you, sir!” the guy calls after them.

“What the hell is wrong with you!” She hasn’t loosened her grip on his arm, and his half-hearted attempts at tugging free from her haven’t amounted to much. He trips along at her side, keeping pace. “Have you actually lost your mind this time? How much did you even give him?”

“It’s not a big deal, Myra.” It’s my fucking money, anyway, he thinks.

“Not a big deal? You just bought several hundred dollars worth of crack! Do you realize that? He’s going to spend our money on *drugs*.”

Eddie shrugs. She can try to make him feel sorry all she wants, but he doesn’t think he’s capable of it right at this moment. “You know

what, Myra? That's his choice to make."

3. Somewhere In Between, Pt. 2

Notes for the Chapter:

This keeps growing, and I'm a slow writer, so I apologize for all of that. I swear Richie will make an appearance at some point, but that point is unfortunately not yet.

The awareness accumulates slowly, like a gentle snow.

At first, it's just a sense of déjà vu dogging him, a barely-there niggling at the back of his mind that he's been here before, he'd swear he has. He'll see the blouse Myra's wearing, the way she's tapping her nails on the kitchen table, the way her lipsticked mouth forms the words he already knows she's going to say half a second before she says them, and it's like seeing a movie you thought you never saw before, only to realize you already know how it ends.

Truthfully, he doesn't need the déjà vu to tell him what she says next. He knows this line by heart out of sheer familiarity.

"Why do you always hurt me like this?" Her voice gives out as she finishes speaking, choked up in her throat as the tears start to well up in her eyes.

Eddie stands dumbly next to the coffee maker, feeling frozen. These are real tears; he's seen the crocodile ones enough times that he could probably host a show on Animal Planet. She's genuinely upset. He feels like he's standing in an elevator that just won't stop going down.

"Honey, I wasn't--"

"Just stop, Eddie. Stop it."

He doesn't even know what he wasn't. He wants to defend himself, he does, but it's the crazed, last-ditch kind of defense of someone throwing an arm in front of their face before they get trampled by a rhinoceros. It's just a reflex, and it's a weak one that he's been all but conditioned out of having.

"You like it, don't you? Of course you do," she says, fisting a napkin and dabbing her eye with it. "You wouldn't do it if you didn't like it."

"If I didn't like--"

"You make me feel so stupid for worrying about you, like I'm some kind of clingy monster. Mark used to do the same thing, I don't know why I--" She blows her nose delicately into the napkin, folding it over carefully afterward to contain the mess. "I don't know why I expect any different."

Throw that away, he thinks, staring at the snotty napkin still clutched in her hand. That's disgusting, throw that away.

"It's men," she snuffles on. "It's men, it's like you get a thrill out of making women feel like such shrews when we're just trying to look after you."

Oh, God, don't squeeze it, he thinks, quietly horrified at the image his brain is feeding him of mucous bursting through the sodden napkin like pus from a blister.

He sucks in a breath and opens his mouth again, words flying out in a jumble because he knows if he stops to think about them, he'll choke. "Myra, first of all, you're not a monster, and obviously I'm not trying to make you seem like a shrew, but I was just on line at the grocery store! I'm sorry, I'm really sorry I didn't check my phone, but I don't know what else to say, I honestly don't know what you want me to say, and I just-- I'm sorry, just please could you throw that *fucking* napkin away, it's making me..."

Sick. It's making him sick. And it has to be the napkin, because if that's not what's making his stomach churn and sour inside him, he doesn't want to think about what is.

There's a scraping sound on the tile floor when she shoves her chair back from the table.

She drops the napkin on his left foot as she storms past him.

He flinches as it bounces off his sock and he stares at it where it falls on the tile, listening to her stomp off into a different part of the

house. He's not sure how long he stands there before he finally makes himself reach down and pick it up.

He throws it away. He washes his hands. The water is probably too hot. He well exceeds the CDC-recommended twenty seconds and after he dries them off, he washes them again.

It was worse the second time, he thinks.

As it turns out, Google doesn't have much to say about 'constant feeling of deja vu' no matter how many different ways he tries to phrase it. He punches variations on it into his work computer the next time he finds himself sitting at his desk, but there's no WebMD article, no Wikipedia, no nothing.

Perfect, he thinks. Another mystery illness, just for me.

It's interesting, though, that he was even able to Google it in the first place. It means he's got some semblance of free will still, that he's not just a recording, retracing his own steps exactly.

He's not sure what any of that means, necessarily, but he is sure that Howard from Accounts is about to ruin his coffee break in about five seconds.

"Edd-ay!"

"Busy!"

Howard ignores him, poking his head even further around Eddie's office door frame, silvering hair flopping around on his forehead. He looks like a sheep, Eddie thinks, all curls and dopey eyes.

"Hey man, you like sports, right?"

"No," Eddie hears himself say, a million years ago.

“No,” he says now.

“Alright, Oscar the Grouch, guess I’ll fuck off with my extra Yankees seat.”

I like the Red Sox, dickhead, he thinks, and then he blinks and wonders where the fuck *that* came from.

It starts to drive him a little nuts, if he’s honest, because the memories start to build up, and remembering the fact that he’s being jumped around in time, plunked into situations he’s already had to suffer through once... it’s kind of fucked up.

In fact, he’d swear it was tailor-made to screw with him, personally, Mr. Risk Analyst. He’s obsessed as soon as he recognizes the fact that there are *options*. Decision points. Does what he does in his little reruns change anything else? He can’t know either way, and it’s going to drive him insane.

He thinks about it at night when he’s dazed and medicated and staring vacantly at the TV on the couch, he thinks about it when he’s zoned out listening to the radio on his commute, he thinks about it on line at the pharmacy, at the bank, at the bodega Myra has no idea he frequents.

He likes their coffee and their cat, and Jennie behind the counter sometimes breaks off the rapid Spanish she’s speaking with her brother to tell Eddie he has beautiful eyes, which he knows makes him turn red but he likes anyway. She has reddish hair and a constellation’s worth of freckles on her cheeks and she always looks at him like she’s really seeing him, like he’s flesh and bone and really there. She feels familiar, like a favorite song. Like the things most people might remember from childhood but that are never much more than a blur to him.

He keeps the bodega tucked away like the treadmill at work, like Otis

Redding in his truck's CD player, like the turtle coin in his pocket that rattles against the pill bottle it shares space with, all his little secrets, squirrelled away like he's a kid with a box of bird feathers and funny-shaped rocks and movie stubs stashed under his bed.

MAKE GOOD CHOICES, the coin says on the flip side, in bold, circus letters, where fake money might normally say NOT LEGAL TENDER.

In none of his reruns has he ever felt like he could bring himself to take it out of his pocket.

Eddie loves driving, but he hates driving when Myra is his passenger.

She makes demands regarding the radio, complains about the heat if the windows are up and laments her hair if he rolls them down. She reads the traffic in front of and around them out loud, but she reads it all wrong, like she's watching soap operas in Spanish and isn't really grasping the plot.

Watch out for that truck, she'll say. He's weaving. He's not weaving, Eddie will tell her, it's just windy, and I'm really more concerned about the dickhead three cars back in the right lane who actually is weaving and clocking seventy and is gonna come cut in front of us in ten seconds, just you watch.

She puts the GPS on for long trips even though Eddie has never once in his life needed so much as a Mapquest printout to get where he's going, and god forbid he deviates from one of the fucking thing's instructions even when he *knows* that exit is going to lead them right into a construction nightmare and the next one is a far better bet.

He looks at her sometimes, sitting there scowling in the passenger seat, and he thinks, you can't even let me have this. Just this. Just this *one* thing I'm good at, that I know I'm good at, the only thing I'd ever claim to be good at besides being afraid of things for a living, and I can't have it. I can't fucking have it.

He feels so small around her, sometimes, he'd swear he needed a phone book to see over the steering wheel.

Right now, they're coming back from a doctor's appointment in White Plains. It's late November, so it's dark, and Myra is actually being somewhat reasonable. Eddie suspects she might just be happy that the doctor they saw told her she was right to be concerned about the dry mouth Eddie's been complaining of. Telling Myra she's right is like handing a joint to a Deadhead.

Eddie's eyes are fixed on the road. The minivan in front of them is wobbling ominously, and even without the *deja vu*, Eddie would have been on high fucking alert just looking at it.

"Heads up, man, heads up," he says under his breath, already reaching over to click his own flashers on.

"Eddie?"

The rear right tire blows exactly like he knew it was about to, and Eddie swears loudly when the van's brake lights flash red and it starts to swerve.

"No, no no no no, don't brake, asshole! Fuck."

"Eddie!"

He slows down, easing over into the right lane to follow the van as the driver wrestles it off the road and noses it into the guardrail.

"What are you doing? Put the car back on the road right now, are you insane? We could be hit, we could be *killed*. Eddie!"

Eddie pulls off onto the shoulder, as far as he can, leaving the flashers and headlights on and the keys in the ignition as he shoves his door open. "Call a trooper, honey," he says absently, hopping out of the car and slamming the door shut behind him.

He jogs up to the van, watching the driver stumble out of it. "Get back from the road, dude," Eddie calls. "You don't brake when a tire blows, are you kidding me? You're so fuckin' lucky you didn't spin out, you were *this* close-- Do they not teach this shit in driver's ed

anymore?”

The guy, a kid really, now that Eddie is getting a closer look at him, walks around to meet Eddie by the back bumper, clearly on shaky legs. “Are you a cop or something?”

“Good Samaritan,” Eddie says, looking him over. “Does anything hurt? It might not hurt right away, but the impact can fuck with your neck. We should call you an ambulance, actually. Did the airbag deploy? Is there anyone else in the car? Fuck, that shoulda been my first question...”

“Good what?” the kid repeats, sounding dazed. “Oh, shit, no, I’m by myself, but my daughter-- holy shit, I just dropped my daughter off, she was just...”

“Hey, hey, it’s ok,” Eddie says quickly. The kid is young, really young, white but dressed like maybe he wishes he weren’t, wearing a flat-brimmed cap that’s so red it’s making his face look even whiter in the glare of Eddie’s headlights.

“Holy shit, man...”

“Bring your energy down low...” Eddie remembers, like a dream. Deja vu on deja vu. He’s on fucking layers of deja vu at this point. He sucks in a deep, even breath, and lets it out again in a cloud of steam, relaxing his shoulders in a way they’re not really used to being relaxed.

“Hey, buddy, you’re fine,” he says. “Everything’s gonna be fine.”

The kid just stands there shaking with his fists jammed deep in his pockets, glancing worriedly over at the van every couple of seconds.

“Phillies, dude? Really?” Eddie tries, nodding at his cap. “Fucking Christ, they don’t even have a real mascot.”

“Hey, fuck you, man,” the kid says, but he’s smiling all of a sudden, and Eddie feels like he’s passed a test.

They lean on the rear bumper, shivering, and wait for the cops to show up, Eddie asking him questions about his daughter and his job

and ignoring Myra's face watching them through the windshield.

MAKE GOOD CHOICES, the coin in his pocket says. He wonders what the fuck that's supposed to mean. He just did everything exactly the same as he did the first time around, and he knows right down in his soul that he did it as right as he could have. There hadn't been any choice to make at all.

Eddie stares past himself in the medicine cabinet mirror, zombie-like, trying to wade through the morass of guilt suddenly rising up around him like floodwater, like there's something caught somewhere, damming things up.

The presence is vague, but it's there, and it's inexplicably turtle-shaped and dotted with stars. He feels like he's fifteen again and horny and sick with the shame of it all, Jesus peeking sadly over one shoulder and the shadow of his mother looming over the other.

You're a bad son, Eddie, they said. You're sick all the way down into your marrow, and we can't save you.

His mother, when she was still alive, used to pray for him. She'd order him near her and grab his hand with stiff, thick fingers, the diabetes already starting to ruin what was left of her health, and he'd be caught there like he'd stuck his hand in a bear trap, his stomach going sour with the discomfort of it and his arm, his veiny, *grown-up* arm, twitching with the urge to pull away like he was still ten years old, weak and tiny.

Heavenly Father, who art so good and righteous, I pray for my son, Eddie, today. Keep him in Your heavenly light, Father; deliver him from Satan's influence and impure thoughts, and may he come to know Your will and everlasting love, Father I pray...

Myra had tried to pray for him once, well-meaning, when he was still hollow-eyed and skittish a few days after Sonia Kaspbrak's funeral,

and it might be the only time he ever remembers having stood up and told her, firmly, definitely, *No*. She'd been hurt, and bewildered, and he'd backed away like she was the one with the devil in her before he even realized what he was doing, slipping out the door and getting in his car and going for a long, long drive, not coming home until it was fully dark and the lights were all out in the house. The only thing he remembers clearly of it is stopping off at a peanut-infested Five Guys for a vanilla milkshake and sucking half of it down before snapping out of whatever daze he was in and throwing the rest away, remembering suddenly that he wasn't supposed to have dairy. Or fucking peanuts. The half-full cup had made a solid sound when it hit the bottom of the trash.

He'd regretted both drinking it and throwing it away.

That's his life, he thinks, jerking the cabinet open. Damned if he does, damned if he doesn't. MAKE GOOD CHOICES, go *fuck* yourself. There aren't any good choices. There's just an array of doors with nothing good behind any of them. Some of them just happen to be a little less scary than others.

Turtle wax on his truck. Ninja Turtles on Jennie at the bodega's son's little t-shirt. Bacteria-ridden turtle cheesecake sitting there in the temperature danger zone on the office kitchen counter with a HELP YOURSELF :) sign.

He throws five dollars at some Girl Scouts collecting to save baby sea turtles from all the plastic straws in the ocean and wishes they would all actually just die and leave him alone. The turtles, not the Girl Scouts.

The Girl Scouts are all gangly and serious and Determined-with-a-capital-D, and they make him smile despite his shitty mood. He wishes they were selling cookies. He's pretty sure he likes Thin Mints.

He's starting to think this is just his existence now, some sort of rerun purgatory that he's never going to be free of, when something weird happens.

Weird is relative, of course, with all the deja vu and reptilian omnipresence. Maybe it's more accurate to just say something different happens. Only it's not, because the something different that happens is that something happens again. Again-again, like actually again, not just another rerun from another life.

Maybe he's seen all the episodes. Maybe he just reached the end of his last season and Netflix just sent it back around to season one again, he doesn't know, but whatever the fuck is going on, he's sitting behind his desk staring at his computer and Howard from Accounts pokes his head around the door frame and asks him if he likes sports.

"No," he says, not even stopping to think about it.

"Alright, Oscar the Grouch, guess I'll fuck off with my extra Yankees seat."

Fuck the Yankees, Eddie thinks. Then he shakes his head and fumbles in his pants pocket for his pill bottle, steadfastly ignoring the coin next to it.

His show must not be over after all, Eddie guesses, because the next thing the universe gives him is a Christmas special.

Myra decorates for holidays, even though nobody ever really comes over. She loves all that tacky shit, loves having Santa and Mrs. Claus

salt and pepper shakers to replace the regular salt and pepper shakers that Eddie isn't supposed to use anyway, loves their fire-resistant artificial tree and the extra-safe LED lights that go on it, the ones that glow that awful whitish blue that makes Eddie's eyes hurt. She loves Hallmark movies about single women who get everything they've ever wanted just in time for December twenty-fifth, and she loves buying Eddie shit he doesn't really want with his own money.

Holiday cards from all of Myra's friends end up Scotch taped around one of their door frames, each one a reminder that the only holiday cards Eddie ever gets are work-related, and he thinks it's a little unfair that she brings eggnog and cookies into the house when she knows he can't have any of it, but overall, he doesn't hate Christmas.

It makes her happy, and things are just... so much better when she's happy.

He hates all of it even less with a little bit of a buzz going. Hey, he coughed earlier. It's flu season. No harm done. And the Hallmark movies are much more tolerable this way.

He's curled up on the couch, dozy and warm, drinking a mug of hot water with lemon, trying to guess how this one is going to end. It's starting to look like the wholesome-looking lead isn't going to make it to the airport in time after all, plot twist.

"He looks like Kirk fuckin' Cameron," Eddie mumbles, giggling. Myra looks up from her Popcorn Factory catalog, eyebrow raised. "Oh, come on, tell me you don't think he looks like he's a televangelist in his spare time."

She rolls her eyes, but she doesn't not smile.

He watches as Kirk not-Cameron gets stuck behind a snowplow and says, in a burst of extremely realistic dialogue, "Darn it!"

"Darn it," Eddie repeats, giggling again. "Fuckin' darn it. Hey," he says, picking his head up off the couch pillow as Myra reaches for another cookie off her plate, his stomach suddenly growling with the memory of the Girl Scout cookies he'd been craving recently. "Hey, gimme one of those?"

She pretends she doesn't hear him.

"Please?"

The catalog hits her thigh with a papery whap. "Really, Eddie? Really?"

"Come on, what's like... one cookie? It's one cookie! One cookie is not gonna hurt me, they're fuckin' tiny, look at them."

Eddie knows damn well he was born with a pair of gigantic puppy-dog eyes and he's not above using them.

She just shakes her head, refusing to meet his gaze. "You are *allergic* to gluten."

"I'm intolerant, and I'm a grown man--"

"And eggs."

"I think I can decide for myself--"

"Oh, you can?" she snaps, finally roused. "You can decide for yourself? Because I really don't think you can, Eddie!"

He drops his head back down on the pillow, squeezing his eyes shut. "I'm thirty-nine years old; I'm a grown man, and I can decide--"

"No, you can't. You can't." She laughs like she's not actually happy. "You act like a child, Eddie, you go behind my back-- I feel like I'm constantly slapping my toddler's hand away from an outlet!"

He *feels* like he's been zapped by a socket he knew better than to touch. He feels like he's buzzing, like his skin is barely staying on, like he's burning up inside with shame. And *anger*, all of a sudden he's so fucking angry, but he's frozen, he's paralyzed and all he can do is ball his hands into fists and jam them into his eyes.

"You know," she says, and he can still hear the mean little smile on her face, the disapproving shake of her head at him. "Your mother always told me you were never going to be able to take care of yourself, that you needed someone to watch out for you, and I still

stayed with you, Eddie. I still stayed. All the things I do for you...”

She’s not wrong, is the thing. He thinks about the pill organizers she dutifully fills, all the nights she eats dinner alone because he’s so tripped out over his own medical issues he can’t do anything except take an over-long shower and stare scared at himself for hours in the bathroom mirror, all the nights even the Viagra doesn’t help, all his pathetic fucking baggage she carries for him; she’s not wrong to be bitter.

He hears her stand up and throw the magazine down on the coffee table. His jaw feels like it’s been wired shut. Stars are blooming behind his eyes like the lights on the Christmas tree with how hard he’s pressing his fists into them.

“I love you, Eddie,” she says softly. “And you’re lucky I do, because I don’t think anyone else would ever be able to *stomach* being with you.”

She stands there over him for he doesn’t know how long before finally, finally he hears her footfalls going up the stairs and into the office, the door clicking shut behind her. It’s a lot longer after that before he moves at all.

When he pulls his fists away from his eyes, he sees the ceiling, glowing blue from the television and the ugly LED lights on the tree, the windows gone dark with nightfall and the drapes still wide open, like he’s on a stage.

“What the fuck...” he whispers, shoving his hands against his eyes again. “What the fuck, what the *fuck*...”

His eyes are damp, slicking up his fingers with tears he didn’t realize he was shedding. He hates how it feels on his skin and he wipes his hands on his jeans, blinking hard, letting the side of his face sink into the hard throw pillow and wishing he could just go to sleep.

The TV is still on. He stares at it blankly.

The Hallmark schlock they were watching is long over and he flinches when a new commercial starts, the volume overly loud and

out of sync with the one prior.

TEEN-AGE MU-TANT NIN-JA TUR-TLES, it blares.

He clamps his eyes shut again and his chest shakes like he's about to either laugh or cry harder. "Fuck you," he grits. "Fuck you, you scaly fuck, fuck you..."

His voice breaks entirely.

The TV clicks and the screen changes abruptly, and now he's watching George Bailey pick up his kid next to a fucking Christmas tree and he can't fucking bear it anymore; the anger that's been standing in the corner inside him like it was in time-out comes bounding back at being made to look at a movie he loves so much like it's taunting him and he sits up, shoves the ugly little throw pillow up against his face, and yells.

He sounds like an animal. He sounds like a wounded fucking animal.

He does it again, the pillow damp with his own breath and tears.

Where the fuck is my Clarence, turtle? Where the fuck is my Clarence, if I'm fuckin' George Bailey and I'm not supposed to jump. Where, where, *where*, why the fuck am I so *alone*

Why do you keep making me *look* at it

He howls and clutches at the throw pillow until his voice finally shorts out, and Myra never hears him.

He's pretty sure nobody does.

"Edd-ay!"

MAKE GOOD CHOICES? Fine.

He gets up and shuts his office door in Howard's asshole face.

Myra's friend Amy smiles fakely at them from the other side of the dinner table. Eddie pokes at his plain chicken breast and vegetables and ignores the somewhat concerned looks Amy's husband keeps shooting him when he thinks Eddie's not looking.

"So what kind of music are you into, Eddie?" the husband asks, emphasis on the 'Eddie.' "I'm a classic rock guy, myself. Never really found anything better than Bob Seger, y'know? He's like-- *it*."

Eddie blinks, stops poking his chicken, and can't even begin to think about how to answer that question.

"You know what," Myra says cheerfully, dabbing pasta sauce from the corner of her mouth, "We don't really listen to much music, do we Eddie?" She giggles. "Is that weird?"

Eddie just looks back at his plate, relieved, letting the conversation move on without him.

That was a little Etta James for your morning commute here on NYC's number one station for all things blues--

Eddie snorts into his coffee mug. More like only station.

--You know I went to church this weekend with my grandmama, you know the type, man. Yeahhh, you know. The hats, man! And I ain't been in a long, long time, so it was--

The station cuts out, fuzzy.

“Oh, fuck off,” Eddie says into the lip of his travel mug, adjusting the tuner with no luck. He loves the radio. He loves having a DJ talk at him from miles away. He never could get into XM or Pandora or any of that because he missed having a person on the other end of the dial too much. Some days, it feels like the only real human connection he gets.

The fuzziness melts away and turns into a voice again, but it’s not the same DJ.

Here’s ‘Happy Together’ from the Turtles to brighten your morning--

“You MOTHERFUCKER,” Eddie cuts it off with a furious slap at the volume dial, killing the power to the A/V system completely. “I can’t have my fuckin’ radio anymore, either?? Huh?” He punches the wheel. “Anything else you wanna ruin? Gonna throw all my pills away next? Trash my CDs? Get me fired? Huh? Fuck you, man. Just--” he grits his teeth and punches the wheel again. “Just fuck you. Gimme my fuckin’ radio back.”

He doesn’t even try turning it back on for the rest of the drive.

And *oh*, this one’s weird. This one’s good. This one’s different.

It’s a new day, for real.

He doesn’t remember any of this. Finally. He doesn’t see how he would, given that he hasn’t set foot anywhere near a deli since college, but here he is, standing outside of this one, on time for his meeting.

Meeting with who? He has no idea. He hopes it’s the turtle, honestly, because he’s got some fucking words for that green piece of shit. He’s buzzing a little with the novelty of it, with nerves that he isn’t sure

are out of fear or excitement.

He stares up at the sign that says KONIG'S KOSHER.

"Dude, don't just stand in the middle of the sidewalk," a kid says, elbowing past him and snapping him out of his own head.

Blinking, he refocuses on the door, which feels like it's calling him in like a porch light calls a moth. A bell jingles merrily as he pushes the door open with his jacket sleeve pulled down over his hand. Vinegar is the first thing he smells, and cabbage, salt and sneezy black pepper and the sweet, stomach-rumbling smell of cooked meat. It's clean and warm and well-lit, and there's a nicely-sized row of people waiting at the counter that bodes well for the place's health code observance.

He looks around, a little lost. For a second, he forgets why he's even there.

His eyes fall on a corner table, bathed in blue, cloudy-day light coming through the big glass windows, its sole occupant regarding the sandwich sitting in front of him with a small, dreamy smile. His dark, curly hair is parted neatly, and Eddie somehow already knows his paper napkin is tucked securely around his thigh, and the lump in Eddie's throat feels like he just swallowed an entire handful of capsules dry.

"Stanley?" he croaks.

Stan looks up. The smile on his face turns warm, quirked up at the corner like he's laughing at a joke only he can hear.

"Hey, Eddie."

4. Interlude in a Kosher Deli

Notes for the Chapter:

This chapter dances around the issue of Stan's suicide, as might be expected. Nothing graphic or disturbing is mentioned.

It's like being underwater, Eddie thinks, all blue and glowing and pressure in his ears, around his head, squeezing his ribs tight, the low hum and clatter of the crowd in the deli muffled like it's all very far away. He stands there with his arms hanging limply at his sides like an idiot, staring at a stranger he didn't even remember he loved until about thirty seconds ago.

"You can sit down, if you want," Stan says. "Or you can keep standing several yards away and we can talk like that, if that's more comfortable for you." His smile twists gently on that last part, amused.

His voice still sounds the same, how fucking surreal is that? Deeper, but still soft. Words still as careful and precise as a Swiss watch. Eddie's not even sure how he remembers, but he does, somehow. He knows this voice better than he knows the sound of his own.

Eddie huffs and shoves a hand back through his hair, tipping his head forward and squeezing his eyes shut before picking it back up again, half-expecting the man at the table to vanish like the steam rising up from the street grates on the other side of the window the next time he looks.

He's still there, and Eddie huffs again, staring. "Holy shit, Stan."

"Have I finally figured out how to get you to stop talking? Twenty-seven years too late, what a crying shame..."

Eddie takes a few juddering steps toward the table. He stops behind the empty chair, gripping the backrest with white knuckles, his heart kicking.

“An Eddie version of *beep beep*,” Stan wonders. “It’s everything I dreamed it would be.”

“No, hang on,” Eddie says, shaking his head. “Hang on, how’d I just fucking forget who you were, like I’ve had fucking brain damage or, or amnesia, or--” He lets go of the chair so he can gesture with his hands, suddenly feeling very full of energy again. Stan just watches him with a decidedly unimpressed expression on his face. “How am I just now remembering-- This is unbelievable! This is fucking insane, Stan, I haven’t seen you in like twenty years! This is--”

Eddie stops. He inhales sharply through his nose and lets it back out again. The chair makes a noise loud enough for the whole deli to hear when he drags it away from the table and drops himself down in it.

“This is fucking turtles...”

He covers his face with his hands and groans.

If Stan thinks that’s a weird thing for Eddie to say, he doesn’t show it. That’s the thing about Stan, Eddie is remembering. Stan is fucking *weird*, so there wasn’t ever too much you could do to catch him off guard. Annoy him, sure, but out-weirding him?

Eddie drops his hands and looks across the table and case-in-point, Stan is currently taking the time to re-pile the potato chips on his plate into neat, wobbly stacks.

“Holy shit, I missed you, man,” Eddie says.

Stan smiles at his potato chips.

“How the hell have you been?” Eddie asks. “I mean, what’s up? You live in the city?”

“God, no,” Stan snorts. He stops moving chips around and looks a little subdued. He rubs the inside of his wrist with a greasy thumb and winces when he realizes he’s doing it, grabbing for a napkin. “I’m an accountant. I’m married,” he says like he’s reciting something memorized. “I live in Atlanta.”

"Fuckin' snowbird, I knew it! You always bitched like crazy all winter, those fuckin' hats you used to wear, dude--"

"That's not even what a snowbird is, God, how do you still not know words?"

"Close enough, dickhead!" He laughs as he says it, suddenly having just the best fucking time. His heart feels light like he didn't even remember it could. "And that's not the point, what are you, ninety? Who willingly lives in Georgia?"

"It's not weird to like warm weather and sunshine, Eddie! It's normal!"

He can almost, almost hear the adolescent cracks and screeches in Stan's grown-up voice.

"Is the retirement community nice at least? Bro, I sincerely hope you wash your hands a lot; those places are disease vectors--"

"Oh shut up, Doctor Oz," Stan snaps, the faux-annoyance in his voice betrayed by his smirk.

Eddie laughs again. He feels so fucking warm, it's like he's burning up with affection, on fire with it, stop-drop-roll because it's going to be the end of him, feeling love like this, it's dangerous like nothing has been in decades because somehow he knows that he'd take a bullet for this guy. You know, if bullets were routinely something to be worried about. He'd push him out of the way if a taxi was speeding towards him while he was standing in a crosswalk, he knows that much. He'd jump down on the subway track to drag him back onto the platform. Eddie never takes the fucking subway, because *hello*, but it doesn't *matter*, the point is...

"Do you want half of this?" Stan asks, his brow furrowed. He's staring intently at his sandwich, lifting the top piece of bread and inspecting whatever-the-fuck underneath.

It's a massive sandwich, the top slice of rye on each half buckling like an unsafe bridge. He can smell the sauerkraut. Mustard the color of the ugly carpet in Eddie's mother's old house is dripping down the

side of one half. His stomach churns just looking at it.

“We used to visit family in Brooklyn when I was younger. We always came here,” Stan goes on, replacing the bread. “They have amazing pastrami,” he says dreamily.

“Mm,” Eddie says, not in the least bit tempted.

Stan shrugs and picks up a half, cramming a bite into his mouth as neatly as anyone would ever be able to with a sandwich that big. He sets it back down, careful of his potato chip towers, and wipes his mouth with a napkin while he chews.

He looks like a baby chewing on its first cookie, like it’s transcendent.

He reaches for the pickle spear next and Eddie covers his eyes like he’s watching a horror movie.

“Oh my god, the pickles are so gross, so gross, don’t fuckin’ eat that, man...”

Stan rolls his eyes and takes a defiant bite.

“Ughhhh, no. No. You know places take uneaten ones off the plates that come back, right? They take the fuckin’ germ pickles off people’s plates and put them *back* and serve them again, it’s so gross, I cannot believe you just ate that-- this is how people get hepatitis A, Stanley!”

Crunch.

“Lemons and pickles, asshole, you never eat the lemons or pickles, the servers don’t even wear gloves when they touch them half the time--”

“Eddie,” Stan says, swallowing. “I once watched you drop your ice cream cone in the dirt and pick it up and eat it anyway.”

“Yeah, I would *never fucking do that*, asshole, don’t make shit up just because you think I’m crazy for not wanting to catch a foodborne illness!”

Stan shrugs, reaching for his sandwich again. “Richie said you

wouldn't do it."

"Who the fuck is Richie?"

Stan flinches inexplicably at that. "A friend of ours," he says quietly. "Anyway, he said you wouldn't. So obviously you did, because you are so infuriatingly *that way* and you were even worse back then, I don't know how I bore it, to be really frank."

"Well, fuck you too, Stanley," Eddie says, crossing his arms over his chest and looking stubbornly out the window.

"Oh, God, you're still such a drama queen--"

"I am not! You're being--" Eddie uncrosses his arms and waves his hands.

"I'm being what? I'll bet you five dollars you reach for a completely inapplicable word."

Eddie sputters for a second. "Mean!" he manages finally.

Stan stares at him, eyes dancing, lips twitching.

They both crack up at the same time. "Oh fuck you," Eddie giggles. He looks at the sandwich as their laughing fit slowly calms, his stomach still grumbling at the sight of it. "I really did that?" he asks. "The ice cream, I really did that?"

"Mm. Yeah, you did."

"I don't remember."

Stan takes another bite of sandwich, chews, and swallows. "We used to jump off a cliff into disgusting quarry water in our underwear. We used to..." he gestures nonsensically, "like, have spitting contests."

"Gross," Eddie murmurs.

"I know," Stan says seriously.

"And I ate an ice cream cone off the fucking ground, man, that's..."

“Gross,” Stan agrees.

They fall silent, Eddie turning that little almost-memory over in his head. It sounds like a story about another kid, in another life. It sounds like a kid he wishes he would have been but never thought he was. That kid would have killed his mother pulling shit like that. That kid would have been her worst nightmare.

“Gazebos,” he mumbles, then blinks, not knowing why he said it.

He glances up at Stan, who’s smiling at him encouragingly.

“What else am I not remembering here, Stan?”

Stan sighs, reaching for the remains of the pickle and rearranging it to be parallel to the edge of his half-eaten sandwich. “What you have to understand about the turtle, Eddie,” he says carefully, “Is that he’s a little... out of touch.”

“I fuckin’ knew it,” Eddie mutters.

“I mean, *of course* this is being facilitated by the Turtle, Eddie. Willful ignorance isn’t a good look on anyone, by the way.”

“Fuck off.”

“Oh, stop.”

“No, you know what, not oh stop, Stanley. This asshole turtle has been fuckin’ torturing me for... who even knows how long! I don’t even know what time is anymore! I don’t even know where we are right now and you’re over here telling me to oh stop--”

“You’re acting like I somehow know more than you do. *I’m* not the damn Turtle, Eddie, I’m just--” He waves his hands. “--Here!”

“Well, a fat lot of fucking help that is.”

“Oh, nevermind, then. I’ll just go, then, and abandon you to the whims of the Turtle. Would that be better? Fuck me for trying to save my friend from his own misery!”

“Save away!” Eddie says, opening his arms wide.

“I can’t believe I missed you,” Stan mutters darkly. “You are still so incredibly stupid--”

“Yeah, well I missed you too, you prissy weirdo, you wanna do something about it?”

Stan looks at him, and they start giggling again, neither one of them apparently able to help it. “I think we can both safely lay claim to that title.”

“Shut up,” Eddie says, “I ate an ice cream cone off the ground.”

“You did,” Stan allows.

“I was a fuckin’ badass,” Eddie jokes.

Stan just looks at him with his I-know-something-you-don’t-know face and Eddie feels like he just put his foot in his mouth, somehow. They fall silent again, the half-eaten sandwich and two-and-a-half empty decades sitting between them on the formica table.

“So what’s up, Stan?” Eddie says finally, forcing the question out, nervous of the answer. Somehow, he knows things aren’t all rainbows. Things never are. He bounces his leg and considers taking a potato chip.

Stan takes a deep breath, like he’s trying to center himself. He closes his eyes, breathes again, and then blinks them open. “The thing to remember,” he starts, “is that the Turtle is very old. The Turtle is beyond old. The Turtle is like... Do you remember Ents, Eddie?”

Yeah, he only read Lord of the Rings like seven times or something. He nods. Of course he remembers Ents.

“So the Turtle... He’s slow.” Stan smiles a little at that, like he surprised himself with his own idiotic wordplay. “Get it? He’s slow and he’s a... Anyway. He’s like an Ent. He’s like a big, cosmic Ent, and he doesn’t know a damn thing about hobbits. Us being the hobbits, obviously.”

“You’re a fuckin’ nerd, Stanley.”

Stan rolls his eyes and keeps talking. “He’s trying to help you, Eddie, but I think he’s hurting you, because he doesn’t... things like second breakfast confuse him.”

“Hobbits, dude? Seriously? Is this a short joke? I’m not that short, five-foot-nine is the average fucking height--”

“I *hate* you so much, truly. Where’s the off button again?”

“How the fuck do you know so much about the turtle, anyway? You guys like turtle bros or something? If you tell me you’ve been helping him come up all this fucking turtle shit I’ve been having to look at all this time, I swear I will throw your sandwich right in the trash, do not test me--”

Stan pauses, rubbing at one of his wrists again. Eddie frowns when he notices just how haunted his eyes look all of a sudden. “Hey, are you alright?” he asks.

Stan cracks a broken-looking smile, and Eddie’s concern skyrockets. “I’m really not so sure, actually.”

“What’s wrong? Hey, Stan, you look really bad all of a sudden, what’s--”

Stan shakes his head like he wants Eddie to stop talking. Eddie shuts up and looks at him helplessly.

“When we were kids, Eddie,” Stan starts again, sounding like every word is hard for him to say, “we did a lot of scary, stupid shit.”

“Okay,” he says dumbly, wide-eyed. Something in his chest is screaming at him to go give Stan a hug.

“We did a lot of stupid, scary, insane shit, and we almost died like a.... A billion times, we did so much stupid, dangerous... It was never either of our idea, to get into things like that, but we got dragged... please tell me you remember some of this, Eddie.”

Eddie remembers being underwater, blue rushing pressure in his ears,

pressing his ribcage, breath bubbling out of him until he thought he'd drown.

He nods slowly.

"And I used to hate it," Stan says, "I used to hate it so much, and I'd fight it, I'd scream and cry and threaten to stay home and I thought--" He shakes his head again and clasps his hands together so hard it looks like he's trying to break his own fingers. "God, and now I look back on it and I think, we were *alive*, Eddie. We were scared but we were so alive. I was wrong."

"Wrong about what? Stanley, what--"

"I was wrong thinking that scared was the worst thing you could ever be."

Stan falls quiet in the wake of his own words, eyes cast down at the table, hands still clasped. Like he might be praying.

Eddie sits in his chair, his foot hammering the floor like the rabbit from fucking Bambi. He remembers being underwater, rushing pressure in his ears and around his ribs, stealing his breath. Thinking, I could drown. Thinking, they will never let me drown.

He remembers loving the hands holding him down, being so scared he thought he'd piss himself right there in the nasty water, right through his underwear, and still trusting those hands so much that the fear just didn't seem to matter anymore.

Eddie jerks his arm forward, nudges the plate off to one side, and covers Stan's clasped hands with one of his own. Stan's hands are freezing, and Eddie wills them to warm up.

"Hey, cheer up, asshole," Eddie says finally, giving Stan's hands a squeeze. Stan gives a huffy little laugh and sniffs, still looking down. "Seriously, I need you to help me give this fuckin' turtle a piece of my mind, I'm so over this shit."

"That is not how this works at all, Eddie."

"I don't care."

Stan looks up at him. He shakes his head and smiles like Eddie's the most profoundly lost cause he's ever seen in his life. "You really haven't changed."

Eddie snorts. "Not likely. My life is a trainwreck. That little kid you were talking about? I don't know him."

He remembers being underwater, though, the pressure tight around his skinny little chest. He remembers not being able to breathe.

Stan untangles their hands, reaches over the table, and smacks Eddie upside his head before Eddie can so much as blink.

"Ow! What the fuck is wrong with you, asshole??"

"Stop being a little bitch, Eddie. You've got more balls than any of us ever had. You've almost got more balls than *Bev*."

"Who the fuck is Bev??"

"It'll come to you," Stan says like he's one-hundred-percent certain about it.

"Cryptic piece of shit."

"Neurotic spaz," Stan fires back fondly.

"Eat your disgusting sandwich."

He watches Stan shrug and pull the plate back in front of himself, picking the half-eaten piece of sandwich back up and biting into it, chewing thoughtfully.

Eddie's stomach churns and growls, loudly, and Stan almost chokes for laughing at it.

"Shut up and chew, you think I feel like giving you the fuckin' Heimlich right now?"

Stan smiles, but does finish chewing and swallowing before he says, "I've watched you do that before."

“What, Heimlich someone? Really?”

Nodding, Stan turns the plate around so that the chip towers are closer to Eddie, like an invitation. “He was choking on a tater tot,” he says.

Eddie bites his lip, staring at the chips for a long second before finally reaching out a cautious hand to take a few.

Stan finishes the first half of the sandwich and looks at the other one like he’s sizing it up. “You saved his life,” he says offhand, without looking up. Like it’s not a big deal.

Like Eddie’s entire chest didn’t just seize up, hearing that.

Like it’s not the first good thing he’s heard about himself in what feels like a lifetime.

Eddie remembers being underwater, and he remembers hands that he loved tugging him up toward the shimmering light until he broke the surface with a splash and a scuffle and his hands reaching out blindly for someone he already knew was there to catch him.

He remembers finally taking that big breath in and sending it back out as laughter.

Author's Note:

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